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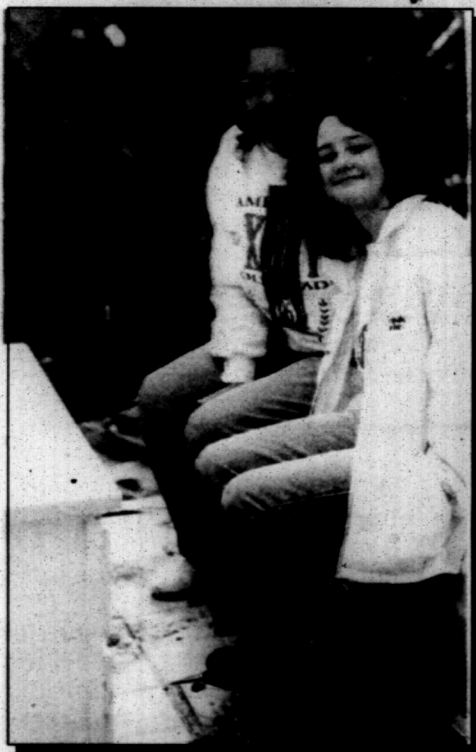
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TUB OF REFUGE — Barbara Marsh and her daughter Grace sit on their bathtub, where the family literally rode out the tornado in Pontotoc. (Photo by Tim Nicholas)

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Miss. Baptist disaster relief unit activated

By Tim Nicholas
Staff writer

Two intense storms, one producing a 23-mile-long tornado, gave the Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief Task Force back-to-back workouts in mid-February.

The first task force response was in Columbus, where strong winds toppled trees which crashed into homes and power lines. The second was in Pontotoc, where a tornado killed at least six people and decimated entire neighborhoods.

In both places, the disaster unit, operated by the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, cooked hot meals which were delivered into neighborhoods by the American Red Cross.

Working from the parking lot of First Church, Columbus, more than 10,000 hot meals were served for seven days beginning the day after the Feb. 16 storm.

From the parking lot of First Church, Pontotoc, the unit prepared about 1,200 meals a day for a week after the Feb. 24 twister.

The home of Bobby Douglas, pastor of First Church, Columbus, had five trees on it, one breaking through the attic into an upstairs bedroom. "This (tornado) reminds us that all these material things are just temporary — here and gone in a matter of minutes."

Chainsaw teams arrived from Baptist churches around Mississippi to help clear trees from yards in Columbus.

One woman told task force members, "I have people cleaning up my yard but can't feed them a thing because I don't have anything." The Baptist volunteers brought lunch for the woman's crew.

In Pontotoc, the damage was worse in specific areas where the tornado disassembled home after home. On 10th Street, where several people were killed, the twister hesitated long enough to spare Loyd Berry, his wife Barbara Marsh, and their daughter Grace, 10.

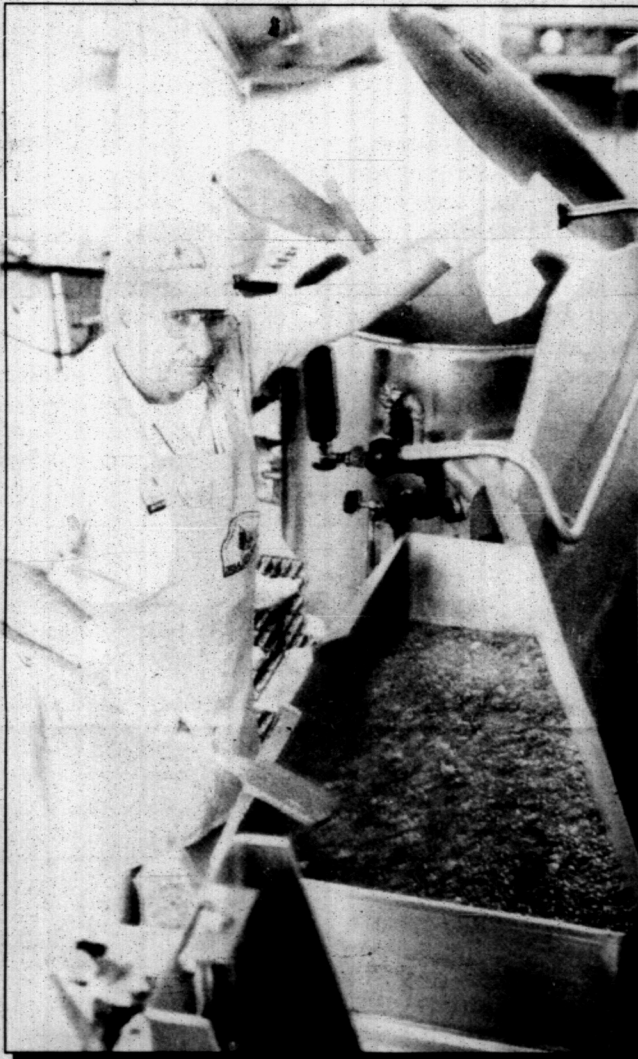
Mother and daughter jumped into their cast iron bathtub while Dad knelt over them. "Suddenly, all I saw was trees," said Barbara. "The back wall was gone." Grace remembers "screaming the Lord's Prayer."

The house lifted off its foundation a few inches, then fell back down. The tornado, "gently picked the tub up and gently put us back down," said Barbara.

"Christ cradled us in his arms," she said. Returning later to the few walls still standing to pose for a picture by the tub, Grace found all 15 of her chickens alive — in what was left of the living room. One had left a gift of a brown egg.

Others in both Columbus and Pontotoc told of close calls and a distinct feeling of God's blessing on their lives.

A tree went through one mobile home.



MEALS UNDERWAY — William Wright, pastor of McDowell Road Church, Jackson, checks the contents of a commercial-grade tilt skillet at the Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief unit in the parking lot of First Church, Columbus. (Photo by Tim Nicholas)

The owners said God had gotten them out. They were away looking to sell their home when the tornado struck.

Eating from a plate provided by Baptists, one woman said something echoed by many: "I didn't realize how long it's been since I had a hot meal."

"This happened last Friday and I have not cried until now," another woman told Kathy Burns, who works as a consultant in the Mississippi Baptist Woman's Missionary Union department.

Burns told the woman she was experiencing

shock, and that she'd had a loss which was hurting her.

"You need someone close to the Lord to be a support," said Burns to the woman. "Remember, God is with you every step of the way."

Some task force members established a temporary kitchen at Starkville, said task force director Jim Didlake. He said the main disaster relief unit later absorbed that work.

Also, West Heights Church, Pontotoc, and Liberty Church in Pontotoc County, fed people. Liberty Church, about 10 miles outside town, established a feeding and grocery center, giving collected food to any who came by.

Only a few blocks from Liberty Church, a mobile home park was destroyed. "The Lord put us at the right place," said pastor James Lewis.

In the Columbus area, churches known to have storm damage included Border Springs, Lowndes County; Canaan, Columbus; and Antioch, Columbus according to Bill Duncan, Golden Triangle associational missions director.

At Columbus, the disaster relief unit was having trouble with one of the burners on its steam kettle. A victim came to eat and stayed to help repair the kettle. "I don't have power or water, but I'd rather be helping here than anything I can think of," he said.

Local volunteer, Billy Turnage, a member of Fairview Church, Columbus, who helped serve hot meals, said he'd read about the disaster relief unit in The Baptist Record, but had never seen it up close. "I'm proud of it," he said. "I see a lot of hurting people getting taken care of."

Editor's note: The disaster relief ministry is funded through the Margaret Lackey Offering for State Missions. Gifts may be sent to the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, P.O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530.



ABUNDANT DONATIONS — Billy Peel (left) of First Church, Houston; James Lewis (center), pastor of Liberty Church, Pontotoc; and Billy Creel, a member of Liberty Church, work amid tons of canned goods donated to help tornado victims in Pontotoc. (Photo by Tim Nicholas)

Bibliocipher

By Charles Marx
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HPB NR JS THN, SKHS,
TKJEZ SKZQ TZDZ SKZDZ,
SKZ BHQN TZDZ HFFR-
LVEJNKZB SKHS NKZ NKR-
WEB AZ BZEJYZDZB.

EWXZ STR NJO

Clue: H = A

Have fun with cryptography and exercise your Bible knowledge. A King James Version Bible verse has been encoded by letter substitution. The same letter is substituted throughout the puzzle. Solve by trial and error. Answer to last week's puzzle: Luke Two: Nine.

Seafarer's ministry opens hearts in Samoa

PAGO PAGO, American Samoa — The incident was typical of many encountered by Rob and Sandra Stip at the Pago Pago Seafarer's Center. A ship's owners had a reputation for having "never paid a penny to anyone, and when the crew complained they were thrown off the ship, arrested, and deported," said Rob Stip.

A group of seafarers from the ship found shelter at the Seafarer's Center and became involved in intense Bible study and prayer. After 10 days, a fishing agent brought \$35,000 to the center and paid the men, saying, "What is it with this God of yours? I can't eat. I can't sleep. ...What is it going to take to make you guys happy?"

As directors of the center from 1998 until early this year, the Stips learned theirs would be much more than the ministry of passing out fruit punch and pool sticks that they had envisioned. They soon saw how God had uniquely equipped them for ministry in ways they had never imagined.

The Stips are among missionaries featured during the 2001 Week of Prayer for North American Missions, March 4-11.

Until early this year they served as Mission Service Corps volunteers at the seafarer's center, which has been operated by the North American Mission Board and the Hawaii-Pacific Baptist Convention since October 1995. The American Samoan experience was just the latest ministry effort of a family that has reached out to those they know best, those who prefer life on the water — and others who often don't seem to fit in to conventional society.

Rob Stip, in particular, is no stranger to living on the fringes. He grew up in the hills of Tennessee, and as a car thief at 17 was offered a choice of either military service in Vietnam or jail. He chose the military, and his familiarity with guns, hunting, and tracking handed down from his Cherokee Indian grandfather helped make him "very proficient in the art of war."

In the early 1980's he described himself

as "not a nice person: drunk, antisocial, and very belligerent." The Stips owned a house initially, but ultimately felt confined on the land and moved to their boat.

One night, returning home from a bar, he sank his dinghy and was pulled out of the water by a man named Frank Mullins, president of Gospel Ship Ministries, and onto the ship "Saved By Grace." It was through that influence that Rob — and later his wife, Sandra — eventually came to faith in Christ.

"My marriage was falling apart. I just decided, 'What have I got to lose?' he said.

"It was like once I started listen-



SOOTHING TOUCH — Rob Stip (right) kisses a young girl's hand after tending to an infected cut on her leg. While director of the Pago Pago Seafarers' Center, Stip often ministered to minor medical needs of children who participate in the center's children's ministry. (Photo by James Dotson)

my Bible, everything that had gone wrong in my life I found a reason for it."

The transformation wasn't immediate, but Stip said the Holy Spirit eventually helped him submit to God's will in his life. He also felt called reaching out to others like them — first in the Tampa area, then back in South Florida, then in Beaufort, N.C.

With Intracoastal Waterfolk Ministries in Beaufort, they visited people on pleasure boats and conducted worship services — with Sandra drawing on her own talents as a musician in leading the musical part of the service and Rob serving as harbor chaplain. It was there that they became Mission Service Corps volunteers. Later, when they were asked about taking on the leadership of the Seafarer's Center in Samoa, they initially were reluctant but finally consented.

"It just scared us to death; we didn't think we were ready for this," Rob said, adding that God had worked it out. "I speak a little bit of seven different languages. My military background came into play in dealing with governments, and the languages and traveling experience helped in communicating with different cultures."

The routine at the center includes regular hours for recreation time for seafarers in port. They also operate a special international call center that allows seafarers to pay by the minute for calls to home at cheaper rates than would be available elsewhere.

"It's a clean, safe environment for international seafarers to come to for recreation and help, whether it be medical, legal, or spiritual," said Sandra Stip, "and we must be here on call for their needs 24 hours a day regardless of what their needs may be."

Ministry often starts with just the simple things: assisting with international phone calls, listening to seafarers talk about the families. "First we have to develop trust," Stip said. "...Once they develop this trust in you, then you can start ministering."

Last year more than a hundred seafarers made professions of faith through the ministry — many from countries where such decisions mean certain persecution even among their own shipmates. A Chinese mission that meets at the center includes many dedicated seafarers who have seen their faith forged by fire.

"There have been reports that some of them have been beaten unmercifully on these ships because of it — but they will not turn around," Stip said.

While the Stips initially saw their role as primarily one of hospitality and evangelistic ministry, opportunities for being advocates for the seafarers and others quickly began to appear.

On one occasion, several young Vietnamese women appeared at the center with the story of how their families had paid thousands of dollars for the right to work in promised high-paying jobs in American Samoa. When they arrived, they found only meager wages and intolerable working conditions. Because they were indentured workers, the management of their company felt justified in the abuse, the Stips said.

Police were called, investigations were conducted, and eventually some relief was secured. During the turmoil, Sandra helped found a Christian grassroots advocacy group called Concerned Citizens for Asian Workers that became an ongoing watchdog for injustices at the plant.

"The Samoan people have gotten together and said, 'How is it that we can live in a country where God is supposed to be in command and yet we are allowing young girls like this to be mistreated?'" Sandra said.

The youngest Stip, 12-year-old Scott, was the impetus for another aspect of their ministry targeted more at the local Samoans than either seafarers or immigrant workers. One of the first things the family noticed about the Samoan culture was that children are treated differently, often neglected and abused by mainland standards.

"My son came here and said, 'Dad, how can only adults be missionaries? Why can't kids?'" Rob said, "and I looked around at the crime, the drugs, the abuse, ... and we started working with kids on our day off."

The ministry settled into a one-hour Bible study each Saturday, followed by a couple of hours of free time for the children in the Seafarer's Center.

The Stips became role models for the children, not only sharing Christ with them and seeing many come to Christ, but also serving as surrogate teachers and parents.



LIFTING PRAISE — Sandra Stip plays keyboard during a Saturday children's ministry worship service at the Pago Pago Seafarers' Center in American Samoa. (Photo by James Dotson)